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ABSTRACT

This report contains the first-year research and findings of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) Puerto Rican Young Men and Poverty Project. This project is a 2-year community-based effort to understand and begin to explain the relationship between the experiences of Puerto Rican men aged 16 to 24 years and the persistent poverty of Puerto Rican families. Education is found to be one of the most critical factors in determining the economic outcomes of young Puerto Rican men. It is also suggested that male unemployment, insufficient work experience, and limited connection to the work force may be greater factors in Puerto Rican poverty than low wages. Changes in the economy help explain these conditions. Another contributing factor is employment discrimination, which affects the job opportunities and earnings of Puerto Rican males. Further research is needed on the roles that delinquency, crime, incarceration, and related issues play in the socioeconomic status of young Puerto Ricans and their families. Current policy issues that require debate include attention to employment and training programs and policies for young Puerto Rican men, antipoverty strategies and social programs, and welfare reforms that examine poverty and the role of young men in the formation of families. An appendix lists participants in the study's round table. Eight figures and two tables illustrate the discussion. (Contains 67 references.) (SLD)

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# MOVING FROM THE MARGINS:

## Puerto Rican Young Men And Family Poverty

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# THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA (NCLR)

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest constituency-based national Hispanic organization, exists to improve life opportunities for the more than 22 million Americans of Hispanic descent. A nonprofit, tax-exempt organization incorporated in Arizona in 1968, NCLR serves as an advocate for Hispanic Americans and as a national umbrella organization for more than 160 formal "affiliates," community-based organizations serving Hispanics in 37 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. NCLR seeks to create opportunities and address problems of discrimination and poverty through four major types of initiatives:

- Capacity-building assistance to support and strengthen Hispanic community-based organizations;
- Applied research, public policy analysis, and advocacy on behalf of the entire Hispanic community, designed to influence public policies and programs so that they equitably address Hispanic needs;
- Public information efforts to provide accurate information and positive images of Hispanics in the mainstream and Hispanic media; and
- Special catalytic efforts which use the NCLR structure and reputation to create other entities or projects important to the Hispanic community, including international projects consistent with NCLR's mission.

NCLR is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and has program offices in Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; Phoenix, Arizona; and McAllen, Texas.

## The Poverty Project

The Poverty Project serves as NCLR's base for information and advocacy regarding Hispanic poverty in the United States. The Poverty Project develops research and policy analysis reports, monitors poverty policy and legislation, maintains a Census Products Library and provides policy analysis and Census technical assistance to local affiliates, and disseminates information about Latino poverty to legislators, national and local organizations, the public sector, and the media.

## The Young Puerto Rican Men and Poverty Project

The Young Puerto Rican Men and Poverty Project is a special two-year, community-based study of the Poverty Project to examine the relationship between the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican males aged 16-24 and the poverty of Puerto Rican families. The project's components include research and data compilation, an NCLR Round Table discussion, and focus group interviews with young Puerto Rican men. The Project seeks to develop a greater understanding of Puerto Rican poverty; as well as identify and promote effective community-based and policy strategies for enhancing the education and employment options of Puerto Rican young men. Funding for the Young Puerto Rican Men and Poverty Project was provided by the Ford Foundation. Additional funding for the completion of this report was provided by the Rockefeller Foundation through its support of the Poverty Project.

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# Moving From the Margins: Puerto Rican Young Men and Family Poverty


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Final responsibility for the content of the report rests with the author. The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and NCLR and do not necessarily reflect the positions of any NCLR funders, or of any of the individuals or organizations that participated in the round table or lent assistance.

# Executive Summary

The following report contains the first-year research and findings of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) Puerto Rican Young Men and Poverty Project. The Puerto Rican Young Men Project is a two-year community-based effort to understand and begin to explain the relationship between the experiences of Puerto Rican men aged 16-24 and the persistent poverty of Puerto Rican families. The report documents the current socioeconomic status of mainland Puerto Ricans and underscores the need to focus both policy attention and community-based efforts to help reduce Puerto Rican poverty.

Poverty among Puerto Ricans on the mainland U.S. is persistent and severe; in fact, among Hispanic subgroups, Puerto Rican families are the most likely to be poor. Almost two in five Puerto Rican families (39.7%) were living below the poverty line in 1990 compared to one in four of all Hispanic families (26.5%), one in 12 White families (8.8%), and three in ten Black families (30.4%). In addition, Puerto Rican children are the poorest children of any major racial/ethnic group in the U.S.; more than half (56.7%) were poor in 1990. By contrast, two-fifths of all Hispanic children under 18 years of age (38.4%), one-sixth of White children (15.9%), and more than three-sevenths of Black children (44.8%) lived below the poverty line.

Poverty has serious consequences for Puerto Rican families; for Puerto Rican youth, high and persistent poverty is associated with limited social and economic opportunities, teenage parenthood, school drop out, crime, and other risky behaviors. The report finds that:

- **Education is one of the most critical factors in determining the economic outcomes of young Puerto Rican men.** Low levels of school completion, poor educational options, and negative school experiences have a direct impact on the employment options and higher educational opportunities of young Puerto Rican men.

- **Male unemployment, insufficient work experience, and limited connection to the work force may be greater factors in Puertó Rican poverty than low wages.** Unemployment rates have risen over the past decade, particularly for workers — including Puerto Ricans — concentrated in inner cities. In addition, compared to their White or other Hispanic counterparts, Puerto Rican men are less connected to the work force, although when they are employed they have higher wages than comparable Hispanic male workers.

- **Changes in the economy help to explain the labor force status of young Puerto Rican men.** The significant declines in manufacturing and other industries that heavily employed Puerto Rican workers are a factor in Puerto Rican male employment status. In addition, the shift from low-skilled jobs to those that require higher skills and education have displaced young men — including Puerto Ricans — who are not adequately prepared for such employment because of low educational attainment levels and limited work experience.



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- **Employment discrimination, which affects job opportunities and earnings of young Puerto Rican males, contributes to Puerto Rican poverty.** While there continue to be questions about the extent to which discrimination explains job status and earnings, there is growing evidence which suggests that discrmination influences the entry and position of young Puerto Rican men in the labor force.

- **Further research is needed on the role that delinquency, crime, incarceration and related issues play in the socioeconomic status of young Puerto Rican men and their families.** The data and literature on these issues and their impact on Puerto Rican young men are scarce, yet research and media evidence suggest that these sets of problems are having a severe impact on the socioeconomic status and stability of families, especially those concentrated in cities.

The data and research in this report also underscore that the issues facing Puerto Rican youth and their families have implications for current public policy debates. For example:

- **Specific attention should be given to Puerto Rican young men in the development of future employment and training programs and policies.** Current consideration of work-readiness strategies in the form of apprenticeships and school-to-work efforts must include a focus on young adult Puerto Rican males who constitute an important segment of the local labor force in many Northeastern and Midwestern cities.

- **Anti-poverty strategies and social programs should be assessed for how well they serve Puerto Rican families and youth.** NCLR research has shown that Hispanics as a whole tend to be underrepresented or not adequately served by federal programs. In particular, policy makers should work to ensure that Puerto Rican youth have greater representation in existing programs and policies, such as Head Start and Job Corps.

- **Upcoming welfare reform efforts should critically examine Puerto Rican family and child poverty, and the role of young men in the formation of families.** Because of the large proportion of Puerto Rican single mother families, the lack of information regarding the men who help to form these families, and the high rate of Puerto Rican family poverty, any efforts to revise the public assistance system must consider and include the impact on Puerto Ricans.

Finally, this report suggests that understanding and improving the socioeconomic status of young Puerto Rican men and their families through a combination of self-help, community-based, and public policy strategies can offer important information for how to address other facets of poverty in the U.S., including urban poverty and the poverty of female-headed families.

The information in this report will be used as the basis for a series of focus groups with young Puerto Rican men in four cities to better understand their educational and employment experiences and obtain their perspectives about how policy makers, advocates, and others can work to provide them with brighter futures. The economic stability and future well-being of the Puerto Rican mainland community — and their ability to contribute to the social and economic development of the U.S. states and cities in which they are concentrated — will, in part, be determined by the role Puerto Rican men play. As this report shows, the need for strengthening their education levels and employability is especially critical.

# INTRODUCTION

Puerto Ricans living on the mainland United States represent a significant segment of the Latino* poor despite their U.S. citizenship status. While one in every 8 Hispanics is Puerto Rican (12%), one of every six poor Hispanics is Puerto Rican (16%). Among states where Puerto Ricans are concentrated, especially in the Northeast, this proportion is greater. Census Bureau data highlight an even more [disturbing] fact: the mainland Puerto Rican poverty rate is four times the poverty rate of non-Hispanic Whites. Almost two in every five (39.7%) mainland Puerto Rican families live below the poverty level compared to one in twelve White families (8.8%) and three in ten Black families (30.4%). In addition to poverty rates, other worrisome social and economic indicators, such as unemployment levels and the proportion of families headed by women, continue to be higher for mainland Puerto Ricans than for Whites and, in some cases, Blacks. Moreover, Puerto Ricans continue to have low levels of high school and college completion, vulnerable work force status, and high rates of unmarried teenage pregnancy relative to both their Latino and non-Hispanic counterparts.

The impact of this poverty — and its underlying social and economic instability — has been especially severe for Puerto Rican children and youth. More than half (56.7%) of all Puerto Rican children under 18 years old were poor in 1990. Because of the youthfulness of the Puerto Rican population — on average, Puerto Ricans are seven years younger than non-Hispanics — the implications of this poverty are serious and potentially long-term. For the Puerto Rican community itself, such severe and persistent poverty will have an impact on educational attainment and success, social opportunities, and future expectations and stability. For the areas of the country where Puerto Ricans are concentrated and will be needed as workers, taxpayers, and leaders, the effects may be profound.

## Puerto Rican Young Men and Poverty Project: Background

In response to the significant proportion of poor Puerto Ricans in the United States —and in an effort to better understand and address the factors that contribute to their disadvantaged socioeconomic status — the Poverty Project of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) is conducting a two-year research and community-based study on mainland Puerto Rican family poverty. The project's focus is on the unique challenges faced by young Puerto Rican men between the ages of 16 and 24 in making a successful transition to adulthood. Because of the importance of examining these issues within the context of the family, the impact of young Puerto Rican men's economic status on the poverty of Puerto Rican families is also being explored.

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* *The terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" are used interchangeably throughout this report to refer collectively to Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans, and others of Hispanic and Latin American descent.*

NCLR's Poverty Project is studying the issues affecting young Puerto Rican males for several reasons. First, much of the research and policy studies conducted on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of mainland Puerto Ricans during the last decade have focused on the situation of Puerto Rican single-mother families and on the decline in labor force participation among Puerto Rican women heads of household.[1] These studies have provided insight into the large proportion of such families in the Puerto Rican community and have helped to explain the persistent poverty experienced by mainland Puerto Ricans, but have not fully explored the role that Puerto Rican men play in the changing structure of the Puerto Rican family.

A second factor which influenced the male focus of this study involves the similarities between the Puerto Rican and African American communities in the United States and the recent literature and emphasis on African American young males. Data indicate that Puerto Rican and African American males have similar labor force experiences; both have high levels of unemployment and low rates of labor force participation. For example, the 1992 average annual unemployment rate was 15.6% for Puerto Rican and 15.2% for Black males; this is in contrast to the 6.9% rate for White males. Similarly, 69.9% of Puerto Rican and 69.7% of Black males, compared to 76.4% of White males, were working or looking for work that year. In addition, Puerto Ricans and African Americans have the highest proportion of families headed by single women; Census data indicate that, in 1991, more than two in five Puerto Rican (43.3%) and more than one in two Black families (56.4%) were headed by a single mother. For both communities, economic experiences and changing family structure may be linked; both factors point to areas which can be explored to address their high rates of poverty.

The final factor that underscores the need for serious research and policy attention on the particular circumstances affecting Puerto Rican males encompasses both educational and social issues. Although the educational attainment of Puerto Ricans has increased over the past decade, there is still a significant gap between the attainment levels of Puerto Ricans and Whites. This means that fewer Puerto Ricans go on to higher education and are eligible for jobs with high wages. For young men, specifically, the low level of education affects labor force status and their ability to support the families that they help to create. It also affects their involvement in crime and delinquency; research suggests that a significant proportion of young men in jail are high school drop outs. Additional research has implied that a significant proportion of the Puerto Rican male population is being "lost" to illicit street activity and homelessness.[2] Finally, health issues are becoming increasingly significant in the poverty of the Puerto Rican community. For example, the AIDS epidemic has already begun to make a marked impact on Puerto Ricans. While data on AIDS cases are not disaggregated by Hispanic subgroup, the National Puerto Rican Coalition reports that "almost 60% of all Hispanic AIDS cases reported through the end of 1991 were from the Island of Puerto Rico and from New York and New Jersey, states where the largest percentages of Hispanics are Puerto Ricans."[3]

The economic stability and future well-being of mainland Puerto Ricans — and their ability to contribute to the social and economic development of the U.S. states and cities in which they are concentrated — will, in part, be determined by the role Puerto Rican men play. The need for strengthening their employability and providing positive options for the more than half of Puerto Rican poor children in this country is especially critical.

## Project Goals and Objectives

The Puerto Rican Men and Poverty Project is examining the relationship between the socioeconomic status of young Puerto Rican men and the persistent poverty among Puerto Rican families. Through this report and the background research, the Project has:

- **Assessed the past and current status of Puerto Rican families.** The data and research presented highlight the major social and economic trends of Puerto Rican families over the past decade and draw attention to the issues facing young Puerto Rican men.

- **Analyzed some of the linkages that exist between Puerto Rican family poverty and young Puerto Rican males' educational and economic status.** The report examines areas that help to explain the declining status of young Puerto Rican men and explores how their status affects Puerto Rican families and poverty.

Through focus group interviews related to education and employment issues and conducted with young Puerto Rican men in four cities, the Project will:

- **Identify appropriate strategies and policies that can have a positive impact on enhancing the employability of young Puerto Rican men and reducing the poverty of Puerto Rican families.** All of the research and data gathered will be used to help formulate hypotheses about what policy makers and community-based organizations can do to alleviate Puerto Rican family poverty and provide brighter futures for Puerto Rican youth.

## Research and Round Table Discussion

This report presents the major research and data gathered during the first year of the Puerto Rican Young Men and Poverty Project, including secondary research and relevant literature. The report also incorporates highlights from an NCLR Round Table meeting held in April 1992 which convened 24 community leaders, researchers, and policy makers to discuss persistent poverty in the Puerto Rican community and to examine, more specifically, the issues and challenges facing young Puerto Rican men. The NCLR Round Table was a major component of the Puerto Rican Young Men and Poverty Project's first year.

NCLR Round Table participants, representing California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, as well as policy makers and researchers from Washington, D.C., discussed three principal issues in the context of Puerto Rican family poverty: education, employment, and community challenges and responses.*

## A Note About Data Limitations

Separate data describing Puerto Rican young males often are unavailable. Because most national data are collected by "Hispanic" as a category and not by Latino subgroup, data on Puerto Ricans may be scarce or non-existent, especially by age group. Often, data are not presented by gender. Additionally, data collection methods for social and economic indicators may vary by state, making comparisons across states difficult. Furthermore, most national data count Latinos twice, as Hispanic and as Black or White since, for Census and most other national database purposes, the term "Hispanic" does not denote a race. This also complicates comparisons.

The data presented in this report are the existing published data on Puerto Rican males, most often for the population 16 years old and over. Where possible, published and unpublished data for Puerto Rican males aged 16-24 were obtained and are presented. More specific data available from the Census Summary Tape Files (STF-4), which contain socioeconomic data by race and ethnicity and by age have recently been released, but are not easily accessible because of their format. Finally, no national longitudinal data are available on the Puerto Rican population, although a new longitudinal data base on Latinos has been created within the Panel Survey on Income Dynamics (PSID) — which previously captured earnings and income data for Blacks and Whites only — and it now contains a Puerto Rican sample. The National Longitudinal Survey on Youth and the PSID, which both contain Puerto Rican youth data, contain very small sample sizes. The sample of Puerto Rican males aged 16-24 is even smaller, which precludes generalizing about the Puerto Rican young male population.

When data for Puerto Rican males could not be obtained, data for Hispanic males or youth are presented for the purpose of providing a context within which to think about the problems facing Puerto Rican male youth.

## Age-Group Rationale

Summary data compiled from multiple sources, including the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, indicate that Puerto Rican young males (16-19, 19-24) are especially disadvantaged relative to their White peers. As the family data presented in this report show, they tend to live in single-parent households, in poor families, and with parents that have limited education and employment experiences. Moreover, research on Puerto Rican youth demonstrates that Puerto Rican teenagers and young adults face difficulties in making the transition from education to employment and to a career.

There is debate about the efficacy of targeting public policy and community-based program efforts to Puerto Rican males aged 16-24: many argue that by age 16, it is too late. It is important that developmental efforts to assist Puerto Rican youth be provided at an early age; however, it is also true that a significant proportion of Puerto Rican youth are already on the margins or outside of mainstream institutions and need policy and community-based support and strategies. For some

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* *For a list of Round Table participants, see the Appendix.*

of these young men, this age range presents a final opportunity to redirect their development and provide them with meaningful school, work, and life alternatives.

Attention on this age group is also critical because there is a tendency to "write off" young men, and youth in general who are over 16, and focus instead on children. While efforts to provide positive developmental opportunities at an early age should be pursued and promoted, especially for poor Puerto Rican children, communities and policy makers have an obligation to address the serious challenges facing Puerto Rican young men now. There is still an opportunity to motivate these young men as they make the transition to adulthood. More importantly, advocates, policy makers, and communities as a whole can not afford to simply "give up" on a whole generation of young men. Not only are they future workers and leaders, Puerto Rican young men aged 16 to 24, in part, also represent young parents. In order to help reduce persistent Puerto Rican poverty, the needs of these young men must be addressed. Especially for these reasons, it is critical that multiple strategies at all levels be fostered to make the most of their youth, nurture their growth and development, and prepare them to be responsible, secure adults as well as productive workers.

# ENDNOTES

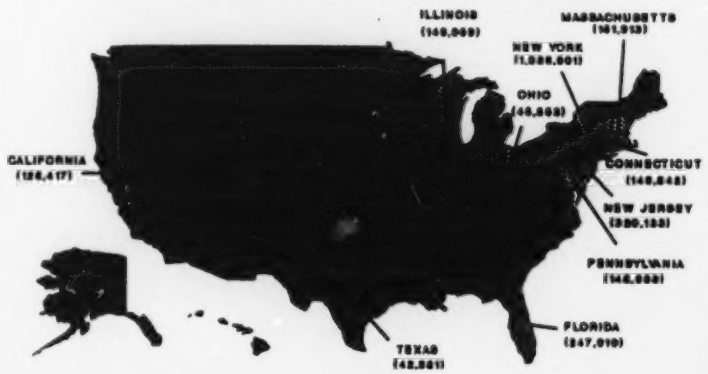
1. See for example, Cooney, Rosemary Santana and Alice Colón, "Work and Family: The Recent Struggles of Puerto Rican Females," in Clara Rodríguez, et al., eds., *The Puerto Rican Struggle. Essays on Survival in the U.S.* New Jersey: Waterfront Press, 1980; Luis Duany, "Puerto Rican Welfare Recipients in New York City: Policy Options," unpublished thesis, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government, 1989; and José E. Cruz, *Implementing the Family Support Act: Perspectives of Puerto Rican Clients*, Washington, D.C.: National Puerto Rican Coalition, May 1991.
2. Rodríguez, Clara, *Puerto Ricans Born in the USA*, Boston, Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
3. Barron, Andrea, *Fighting Back: Puerto Ricans Respond to the AIDS Epidemic*, Washington, D.C.: National Puerto Rican Coalition, February 1992, p. 5.

## Mainland Puerto Ricans: Current Status and Significant Issues

Mainland Puerto Ricans constitute 11.6% — or about one-eighth — of the U.S. Latino population. They are relatively youthful, highly urbanized, and primarily concentrated in a few states in the Northeast and Midwest, although their numbers are increasing in Western and Southeastern states. In 1990, the top ten states with the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans as a percentage of total population were New York, New Jersey, Florida, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Illinois, California, Ohio, and Texas, as illustrated in Figure 1. While Puerto Ricans live in many parts of the U.S., as the map shows, Table 1 indicates that they continue to live mostly in Northeast cities.

*Figure 1*

**TOP TEN STATES WITH THE LARGEST CONCENTRATION OF PUERTO RICANS**




Source: *Puerto Ricans in the U.S. Mainland: A Special Report Based on the 1990 Decennial Census*, National Puerto Rican Coalition, August 1992

Although Puerto Ricans have made modest gains in educational attainment over the last ten years and have higher median incomes than other Latinos, Puerto Ricans continue to have the lowest socioeconomic status of any Hispanic subgroup, as defined by poverty and employment data. Trend data illustrate that this economic disadvantage has persisted for several years. Major changes in family structure, as well as serious challenges to labor market participation in the previous two decades, have influenced their severely disadvantaged social and economic position and prompted community, research, and policy attention. The information that follows* presents a current socioeconomic profile of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. with an emphasis on Puerto Rican poverty, a discussion of the major factors associated with Puerto Rican poverty, and a summary of key research.

*Table 1*

Ten Cities with the Largest Concentration of Puerto Ricans as a Percentage of Total Population

| City | 1980 Population | 1990 Population | % of city's Population (1990) |
|---|---|---|---|
| New York, NY | 860,552 | 896,763 | 12.3% |
| Chicago, IL | 112,074 | 119,866 | 4.3% |
| Philadelphia, PA | 46,587 | 67,857 | 4.3% |
| Newark, NJ | 39,732 | 41,545 | 15.1% |
| Hartford, CT | 24,615 | 38,176 | 27.3% |
| Jersey City, NJ | 26,830 | 30,950 | 13.5% |
| Bridgeport, CT | 22,146 | 30,250 | 21.4% |
| Paterson, NJ | 24,326 | 27,580 | 19.6% |
| Boston, MA | 18,899 | 25,767 | 4.7% |
| Springfield, MA | 12,377 | 23,729 | 15.1% |
| Total | 1,188,138 | 1,302,483 | |

Source: *Puerto Ricans in the U.S. Mainland: A Special Report Based on the 1990 Decennial Census*, National Puerto Rican Coalition, August 1992.

* *Some of the information presented in this section is adapted from the unpublished paper prepared for the Puerto Rican Young Men and Poverty Project Round Table, held on April 13, 1992 at the National Council of La Raza, Washington, D.C.*

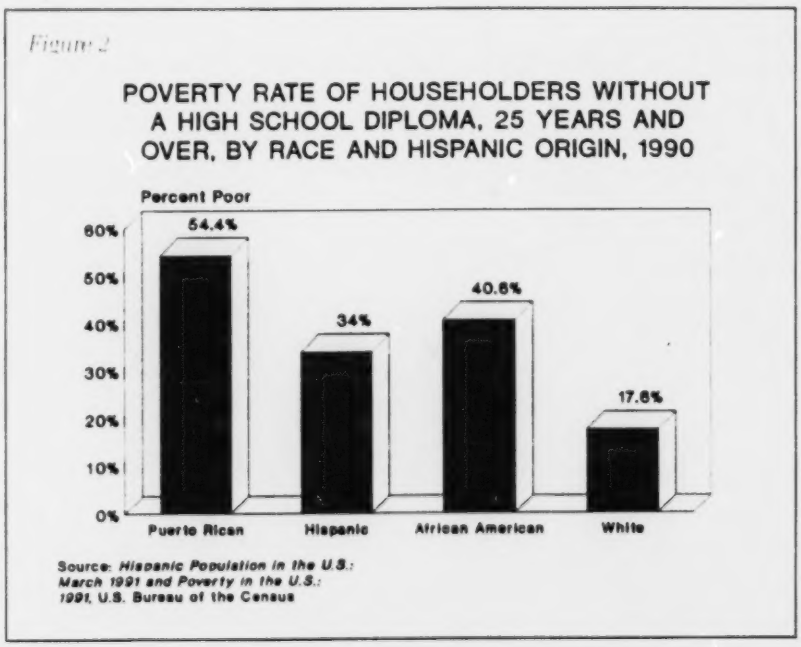
## Selected Economic Characteristics of Puerto Ricans, 1980-1990

- **Puerto Ricans made significant gains in educational attainment between 1980 and 1990, but the educational attainment gap between Puerto Ricans and non-Hispanics remains wide.** In the early 1980s, about two in five Puerto Rican adults 25 years old and over were high school graduates (42.2%). By 1990, more than half of all Puerto Ricans in this age group had completed high school (58.0%). In comparison, four-fifths of non-Hispanics 25 and over (80.5%) had completed high school in 1990, up from 72.2% in 1982.

  In addition, the proportion of Puerto Ricans who are college graduates remains low compared to the non-Hispanic population. While the college completion rate steadily increased during the early part of the 1980s, the rate grew stagnant in the latter half of the decade. Currently, one in ten Puerto Ricans has completed college (10.1%); more than one in five non-Hispanics have four-year college degrees (22.3%).

- **Low educational levels are closely linked to high Latino poverty rates, especially among Puerto Ricans.** As shown in the figure below, the poverty rate for White heads of household who did not complete high school in 1990 was 17.6%; by contrast, 40.6% of comparable Black householders and 34.0% of comparable Latino householders were poor, as were more than half of Puerto Rican householders (54.4%).

*Figure 2*



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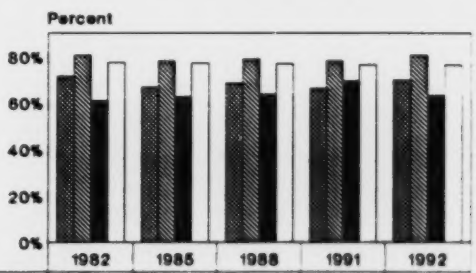
- **The labor force participation rates of Puerto Rican men have registered negative changes over the past two decades.** Table 2 and Figure 3 illustrate the labor force participation rate of Puerto Rican men and show that it has decreased throughout the 1980s. This decline in Puerto Rican male participation in the work force has also been documented in the Latino poverty literature. Puerto Rican men have among the lowest labor force participation rates of any ethnic/racial group and the lowest of any Hispanic subgroup. Less than seven in ten Puerto Rican men 16 years old and over (69.9%) were participating in the labor force in 1992, compared to four-fifths of all Hispanic men (80.5%) and three-quarters of non-Hispanic men (75.1%).

*Figure 3*

**MALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1982-1992**




| | 1982 | 1985 | 1988 | 1991 | 1992 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Puerto Rican | 71.5% | 68.9% | 68.6% | 68.4% | 69.9% |
| Hispanic | 80.5% | 78% | 78.9% | 78.2% | 80.5% |
| African American | 61% | 62.9% | 63.8% | 69.5% | 63.3% |
| White | 77.4% | 77% | 76.9% | 76.4% | 76.4% |

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports (1982-1992)

- **Median earnings of employed Puerto Rican men are higher than those of all Hispanic men and lower than those of their non-Hispanic counterparts.** In 1990, the median earnings of Puerto Rican men were $18,193, compared to $14,141 for all Hispanic men. This may be due, in part, to concentration in areas where salaries are higher than average. However, Puerto Rican male median earnings were four-fifths the earnings of non-Hispanic men ($22,207).

- **The unemployment rate of Puerto Rican males has consistently been about twice the rate of White non-Hispanic men; Puerto Rican men now have the highest unemployment rate of any Hispanic subgroup.** Table 2 shows troubling unemployment statistics for Puerto Rican males 16 years of age and older. Their unemployment rate has fluctuated throughout the decade and, at the height of the economic recession in the early 1980s, reached a high of

20.8%. While the Puerto Rican male unemployment rate dropped between 1989 and 1990, it rose between 1990 and 1991. In 1992, about one in six Puerto Rican men (15.6%) were unemployed — an increase of 3.7 percentage points since the previous year — compared to 6.9% of comparable White men and 15.2% of comparable Black men. This rate does not include those men who are not in the labor force and not seeking employment and is higher for younger workers and those with lower educational levels.

- **Trend data show that the proportion of Puerto Rican women working or looking for work decreased from 1960 to 1990, but has begun a slight increase since 1990.** In 1960, 40.3% of Puerto Rican women were working or looking for work, compared to 32.9% in 1970, 41.7% in 1980, and 41.4% in 1990. While the Puerto Rican female labor force participation rate

*Table 2*

**Selected Characteristics of the Puerto Rican Population**

| Year | Median Income ($) Family | Male | Educational Attainment of Persons 25 Years and Over (%) 4+ Years of High School | 4+ Years of College | Labor Force Participation Rates -- Males (%) | Male Unemployment (%) | Family Poverty Rate (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1977/78 | 8,000 | 8,100 | 36.0 | 4.2 | 72.6 | 11.5 | N/A |
| 1982 | 11,300 | 9,206 | 42.2 | 5.1 | 71.5 | 20.8 | 42.4 |
| 1985 | 11,536 | N/A | 46.3 | 7.0 | 66.9 | 14.3 | 41.9 |
| 1988 | 15,185 | 15,672 | 51.0 | 9.6 | 68.6 | 8.2 | 37.9 |
| 1989 | 18,932 | 16,122 | 54.0 | 9.8 | 69.6 | 12.1 | 30.8 |
| 1990 | 19,933 | 18,222 | 55.5 | 9.7 | 69.2 | 8.2 | 30.4 |
| 1991 | 18,008 | 18,193 | 58.0 | 10.1 | 66.4 | 11.9 | 37.5 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports (1977- 1992).

has begun to show signs of increase over the past several years, it remains low compared to that of other women and is the lowest of any Hispanic subgroup. More than two-fifths of Puerto Rican women 16 years old and over (47.1%), compared to slightly more than half of all Hispanic women (52.6%) and almost three-fifths of non-Hispanic women (58.2%), were in the paid labor force as of 1992.

- **Although Puerto Rican women have low labor force participation rates, the median earnings of employed Puerto Rican women are higher relative to other Hispanic subgroups, but still inadequate to support a family.** In 1990, for Puerto Rican women working in the paid labor force, median earnings were $11,702, compared to $12,904 for Cuban American women, $11,582 for Other Hispanic women, $9,981 for Central and South American women, and $9,286 for Mexican American women. Median earnings of non-Hispanic women were $12,438.

- **Median income of employed Puerto Ricans has increased steadily over the past ten years, but remains well below that of non-Hispanics.** Puerto Rican families with earnings have experienced steady rises in their median income level over the past decade; however, a slight dip in Puerto Rican family median income occurred between 1990 and 1991. The median income of non-Hispanic families is twice the median income of Puerto Rican families. In 1990, non-Hispanic families had a median income of $36,334 compared to $18,008 for Puerto Rican families. The median income of all Hispanic families was $23,431. These figures, however, do not include inflation adjustments.

**Sources**: Bureau of the Census, *Poverty in the United States: 1990*, Bureau of the Census, *Poverty in the United States: 1991*. *The Hispanic Population in the United States: March 1991*. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings*, February 1992. *Latino Child Poverty in the U.S.*, Children's Defense Fund, August 1991; Unpublished data, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1993.



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# Puerto Rican Poverty

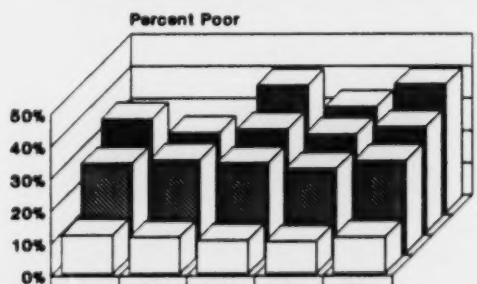
## Overview

Compared to other Latinos, poverty in the Puerto Rican community has been especially persistent and severe and has been both a result of and a contributing factor to other social problems affecting Puerto Ricans. In fact, the Puerto Rican poverty rate has changed little over the past two decades. This poverty is particularly devastating for Puerto Rican children and youth. The following data from the Census Bureau offer a statistical snapshot of Puerto Rican poverty:

- **The poverty rate of Puerto Rican families is consistently higher than that of non-Latinos; currently, the poverty rate is four times the rate for White families and slightly higher than the rate for Black families.** Table 2 on the previous page shows an upward trend in the poverty rate of Puerto Rican individuals and families in the early part of the 1980s. While all families began to experience economic recovery in mid-decade, Puerto Ricans still faced extremely high poverty rates. The 1990s began with the Puerto Rican poverty rate at the same level at which it peaked in the 1980s. In 1991, almost two-fifths of all Puerto Rican families (39.7%) lived below the poverty level, compared to less than one-tenth of White families (8.8%), slightly more than one-quarter of all Hispanic families (26.5%), and three in ten Black families (30.4%). Figure 4 below shows similar data for individuals: 40% of all Puerto Ricans were poor in 1991.

*Figure 4*

**PERSONS BELOW POVERTY LEVEL, BY RACE/ETHNICITY: 1983-1991**

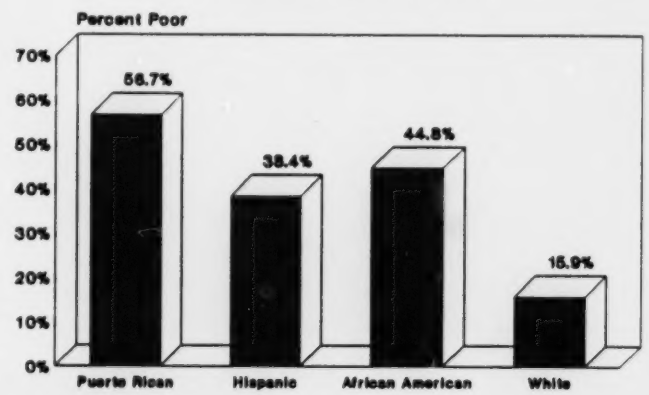



| | 1983 | 1985 | 1987 | 1989 | 1991 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Puerto Rican | * | * | 39.7% | 33% | 40% |
| African American | 35.7% | 31.3% | 32.4% | 30.7% | 33% |
| Hispanic | 28% | 29% | 28% | 26.2% | 28.7% |
| White | 12.1% | 11.4% | 10.4% | 10% | 11.3% |

Source: Census Bureau, Series P-20
* Data not available

- **The poverty rate for all Puerto Rican children continues to climb, making Puerto Rican children the poorest of any major racial/ethnic group in the U.S.** More than half of all Puerto Rican children under 18 (56.7%) were poor in 1990, compared to almost two-fifths of all Hispanic children (38.4%), more than three-sevenths of all Black children (44.8%), and about one-sixth of White children (15.9%). In 1991, the Puerto Rican child poverty rate was 58.0%.

*Figure 5* **CHILD POVERTY RATES BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1990**




Source: *Hispanic Population in the U.S.: March, 1991 and Poverty in the U.S.: 1991*, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

- **Puerto Rican female-headed families are especially likely to be poor.** Almost two-thirds (64.4%) of Puerto Rican female-headed families were poor in 1990, compared to one in two Black female-headed families (51.2%) and almost three in ten White female-headed families (28.4%). By contrast, 16.8% of Puerto Rican married-couple families were poor that same year, as shown in Figure 6. Almost three-quarters of all poor Puerto Rican families (74.4%) are maintained by single mothers.

- **Living in a single-mother family more than triples the chances of being poor for a Puerto Rican child.** Almost three-quarters of Puerto Rican children living in a family maintained by a woman were poor (74.4%) in 1989. By contrast, the poverty rate of Puerto Rican children in married-couple or male-headed families was 20.3%.

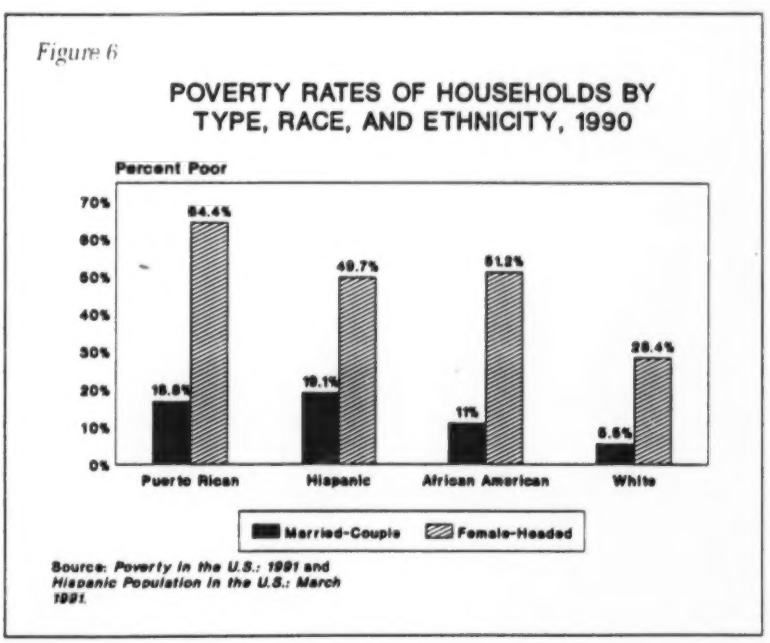
## Factors Associated With Puerto Rican Poverty

The factors associated with Latino poverty overall, including low educational attainment, concentration in low-wage work, growth in single-mother families, immigration, and discrimination, only partially explain the persistence of high Puerto Rican poverty. According to the some of the major research, six principal factors underlie and help to explain the persistent poverty of Puerto Ricans:

- **Industrial and economic changes.** Research and analyses by Edwin Meléndez, Clara Rodriguez, the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy, the National Puerto Rican Coalition, and others have illustrated that changes in the economy during the 1960s and 1970s greatly affected the Puerto Rican community. Specifically, U.S. cities lost thousands of low-skill, well-paid manufacturing jobs as the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy began. The "deindustrialization" of cities, especially in the Northeast where Puerto Ricans were heavily concentrated at that time, eliminated jobs filled by Puerto Ricans with limited levels of education. Figure 7 illustrates the growth in service jobs over the past three decades.

- **Changes in skill requirements.** The demands of the growing service sector economy increased the labor market demand for higher literacy and numeracy skills, displacing low-skilled segments of the population, like Puerto Ricans, who have historically been undereducated. Since 1979, almost nine out of every ten new jobs created have been in industries, like business and health services,[1] which require high levels of education and for which many Puerto Ricans are not qualified.

*Figure 6*




Source: *Poverty in the U.S.: 1991* and *Hispanic Population in the U.S.: March 1991.*

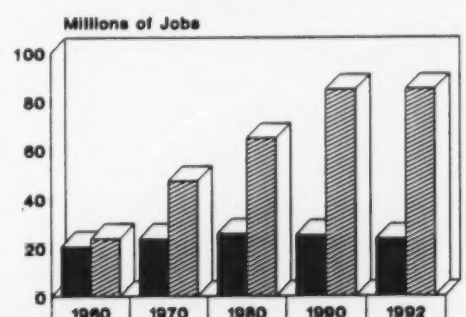
- **Gaps in educational attainment between Puerto Ricans and non-Hispanics.** Over the past two decades, Puerto Ricans have made gains in their educational attainment, as measured by median years of school completed. However, examination of high school drop out and high school and college completion data show that there are still wide educational disparities between Puerto Ricans and non-Hispanics which put Puerto Ricans at a disadvantage when competing for jobs.

- **Growth in women-maintained households.** The proportion of Puerto Rican female-headed households increased during the 1980s, but has been decreasing since 1989. Numerous studies have documented that such families experience higher rates of family and child poverty than two-parent families, and that Puerto Rican single mothers tend to have limited work experience and rely disproportionately on public assistance.

- **Unstable attachment to the labor force.** The labor force status of Puerto Ricans has changed dramatically since the major migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. during the early 1950s. Upon their arrival, Puerto Ricans — including women — were more likely to be working or looking for work than their non-Hispanic counterparts. For many reasons explained in this report, forty years later, both Puerto Rican men and women lag behind non-Hispanics in labor force participation and experience higher unemployment rates than Whites, other Hispanics, and, in some cases, Blacks.

*Figure 7*

**NUMBER OF GOODS-PRODUCING AND SERVICE-PRODUCING JOBS (1960-1992)**




| | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 1992 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Goods-Producing | 20.434 | 23.578 | 25.658 | 24.96 | 23.42 |
| Service-Producing | 23.578 | 47.302 | 64.748 | 84.822 | 86.017 |

Source: *Employment and Earnings*, May 1993, U.S. Department of Labor

- **Geographical location and concentration.** Recent research has begun to examine the labor market experiences of the mainland Puerto Rican population based on the areas of the country in which they reside — primarily the Northeast and Midwest —which have been especially affected by economic changes and which offer Puerto Rican workers poor employment opportunities.

All of these factors have combined to create an unstable situation for Puerto Rican families on the U.S. mainland.

## A Debated Factor: Migration

Although migration between Puerto Rico and the mainland U.S. has been described as a primary reason for the poor socioeconomic status of Puerto Ricans in the U.S., migration as a contributor to Puerto Rican poverty is difficult to confirm because Puerto Rican migration data are not regularly, or scientifically, collected. Moreover, little research exists on the demographic characteristics of migrants and the effects of migration on the socioeconomic status of mainland Puerto Ricans. The limited research that has been done has examined the number of Puerto Ricans migrating and the reasons behind their migration.

Significant Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. mainland began in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As economic opportunities on the mainland increased during this post-World War II economic boom, low airfares between New York and Puerto Rico were introduced, thereby facilitating migration between Puerto Rico — where there was a [surplus] of low-skilled labor — and the mainland. According to the Bureau of Applied Research on the Puerto Rican Population in New York City, Puerto Rican migrants in the early 1950s included both men and women of all ages. These data show that about four in ten were men between the ages of 15 and 45; the Bureau noted that Puerto Rican migration, compared to "foreign" migration, was characterized by family as opposed to individual movement.[2]

The principal factor underlying the period of greatest migration from Puerto Rico —economic opportunity — also has influenced more recent Puerto Rican migration. Since those early decades of migration to the mainland, the economies of both the U.S. and Puerto Rico have undergone serious changes. Instead of leaving the island because of economic opportunities in the U.S., many Puerto Ricans are now leaving the island because of the lack of economic opportunity in Puerto Rico.[3] Therefore, in addition to the promise of jobs, a wider range of employment options, and higher salaries on the U.S. mainland, the lack of economic opportunity in Puerto Rico also influences migration. As recent research describes, shifts and trends in the mainland economy also have consequences for the Puerto Rican economy, causing some islanders to migrate when they cannot find employment.[4]

According to a recent study on migration to and from Puerto Rico, between 1982 and 1988 over 151,000 more Puerto Ricans left the island than moved to it,[5] although research by the Puerto Rican Planning Board shows that, in general, the total number of migrants to and from the island between this period dropped, so that 1988 migration was half of 1982 migration.[6] In contrast to the earlier wave of migration, the majority of migrants from Puerto Rico now tend to be male with education attainment levels comparable to the general population of Puerto Rico. In addition, since only 8.6% come and go within a year, this suggests that the length of stay in the U.S. is not only seasonal or short-term. Those who do return are usually males with low educational attainment who have difficulty finding jobs.[7] It is difficult to get a sense of who is and how many are going back and forth since, as sociologist Clara Rodriguez points out, only 5% of Puerto Ricans living in New York City noted on their 1980 Census forms that they had lived in Puerto Rico during the previous five years.[8]



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## The Impact of Poverty on Puerto Rican Youth

The research and data presented above illustrate the disturbing status and obstacles facing mainland Puerto Ricans and their families. There is also strong evidence that these issues affect Puerto Rican children and youth to a greater degree. In particular, Puerto Rican male youth face serious challenges to their development, especially because they face the transition from adolescence to adulthood living in the poorest families. Because of the disadvantage often associated with such poverty, including lack of social and educational opportunities, young Puerto Rican men are vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviors and often feel little hope about their futures. Based on the experience of other urban populations with similar socioeconomic characteristics, the potential for increasing involvement in delinquent activity and dangerous behavior — especially for Puerto Rican males — is high.

In addition to the persistent poverty documented above, young Puerto Rican men on the border of adulthood face other challenges. These include:

- **Poor Educational Experiences.** Hispanic youth, overall, remain the most undereducated major segment of the U.S. population at a time when they represent one in ten elementary and secondary school students. Among Hispanic youth aged 18-24, 55% have completed high school, compared to 75% of Blacks and 82% of Whites. Recent national data show that more than one in three Latino youth aged 16-24 do not have a high school diploma. Additional studies have shown that the quality of education received by a substantial proportion of Puerto Rican and Latino youth is poor, that they are especially likely to learn in segregated schools from teachers with fewer credentials than those in other school districts, that often they are held back and enrolled below the grade level expected for their age, and that they have low rates of college enrollment and completion.[9]

- **Lack of Employment Opportunities.** In 1991, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than one in five Latino youth (22.9%) looking for a job could not find one. Because of limited or poor education, the jobs they qualify for and hold tend to be low-paying and unstable. Recent data indicate that the unemployment rate for job seekers aged 16-19 in New York City and comparable cities is at a record high and that teenagers, especially minority youth, are especially likely to face barriers to entry-level jobs.[10]

- **Teen Fatherhood.** Teenage pregnancy is often viewed as a young woman's problem; in fact, the role that young Puerto Rican men play in creating families has received little attention. Data show that Latina teens, as a whole, are twice as likely to become parents and more likely to give birth out-of-wedlock than White teens. In 1990, Latina women under age 20 gave birth to 97,685 babies in 48 reporting states. Among Latino subgroups, Puerto Rican young women are especially likely to have babies outside of marriage; more than one-quarter (22%) of all Puerto Rican births were to young women under 20 years old in 1990.

These births contribute to several problems, including high drop out rates for both young parents, an increase in single-parent families, and extremely high poverty rates. Moreover, young men with limited skills and poor employment opportunities are more likely to become fathers than young men with above-average skills and positive life options.[11]

- **Poor Health Status and Limited Care.** As a result of poverty, poor access, and limited information, Latino youth are likely to receive poor or no health care. In particular, young Latino men are the most likely population group to have no health insurance [cite]. This affects their overall health status and their susceptibility to illness. In 1989, for example, Hispanic youth aged 15-24 were nearly twice as likely to die from HIV/AIDS as non-Hispanic Whites (2.4% vs. 1.2%). New data from the Centers for Disease Control show that AIDS is now the leading cause of death for Puerto Rican males aged 25 to 44. Almost two in five deaths (38.4%) among Puerto Rican men living on the mainland were from AIDS in 1990.

- **Crime, Delinquency, and Incarceration.** Young men who are poor and have limited educational and economic options are especially likely to become involved in risky behaviors, including crime and substance abuse. While disaggregated national data are not available, research from New York City suggests that young Puerto Rican men are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.[12]

Puerto Ricans are a significant segment of the U.S. Latino population and of the cities where they reside, yet the discussion above illustrates that there continue to be serious educational and socioeconomic gaps between Puerto Ricans, other Latinos, and the White population. For Puerto Rican youth, these disparities are especially troublesome. These differences must be narrowed to ensure that young Puerto Rican men successfully make the transition from school to work or higher education, have adequate supports to prepare them for and lead them into adulthood, and are able to be both productive and stable for their families and communities.

# ENDNOTES


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7. *Ibid.*
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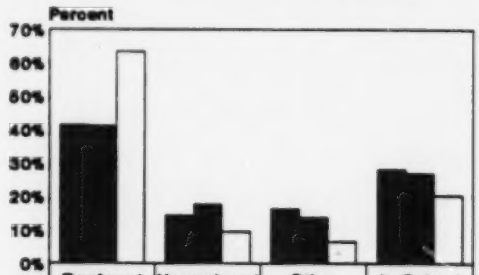
# TWO KEY AREAS FOR INTERVENTION: EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The high and persistent rates of family and child poverty in the Puerto Rican community and the unstable economic status of Puerto Rican workers, both men and women, have gone largely unnoticed or have been ignored. Researchers and policy makers alike, as well as the general public, have accepted that the status of the Puerto Rican community is due primarily to their own lack of effort. The issues that have fueled Puerto Rican poverty are multiple and not always clearly distinguishable, but the outcome is certain, especially for Puerto Rican children and youth. For Puerto Rican young men, in particular, the ways in which their status affects the overall well-being of the Puerto Rican community, as well as the effects of Puerto Rican poverty on the futures of these young men, has only recently begun to gain attention.

Figure 8 below illustrates the current picture of young males aged 16-24 in the civilian non-institutional population. It only tells part of the story since data on young males in the armed forces and in institutions must also be reviewed. According to these data, 41.3% of Puerto Rican young men, compared to 63.5% of White men, are employed, although young men in this category can be in school in addition to working. More than one-quarter (28.1%) of young Puerto Rican men are going to school and not in the labor force. It is important to note, however, that almost nine in ten (88.8%) Puerto Rican men, and more than three in four Black males, in this category are between the ages of 16 and 19. Therefore, of the proportion going to school, most are still enrolled in high school. By contrast, more than one-quarter (27.9%) of White males in this category are 20-24, suggesting that they are pursuing higher education. One in seven (14.4%) young Puerto Rican men is unemployed and looking for work; and one in six (16.3%) is categorized as "other," which includes those who are unable to work, are keeping house, and do not fit into one of the other categories which ask for "principal activity." Taken together, almost one-third of young Puerto Rican men are neither employed or engaged in a meaningful education or employment opportunity.

*Figure 8*

**STATUS OF YOUNG MEN: CIVILIAN NON-INSTITUTIONAL POPULATION, 16-24 YEARS OLD (1992)**




| | Employed | Unemployed | Other | In School |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Puerto Rican | 41.3% | 14.4% | 16.3% | 28.1% |
| African American | 41.2% | 17.8% | 13.9% | 27% |
| White | 63.5% | 9.5% | 6.5% | 20.4% |

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, unpublished data, 1993

These data show that Puerto Rican young men have higher unemployment and lower employment rates than their White counterparts. This supports the previous discussion which strongly indicates that changes in education and the labor force are the two areas which hold the greatest promise for improving the socioeconomic status of young Puerto Rican men. It is also important that Puerto Rican male education and employment status begin to be understood in the context of Puerto Rican family poverty.

## Education: The Critical Factor

Research and policy studies have documented and underscored the connections between education and socioeconomic status. There is overwhelming evidence that youth and adults with higher levels of education have higher earnings. Among all racial and ethnic groups, high school graduates have higher incomes and are more likely to be employed than those who dropped out of high school. Recent work has begun to show the effects of education on economic and social stability among Hispanics. As a 1990 NCLR analysis indicated, low educational attainment among Hispanics is closely associated with low incomes and high poverty. Recent data show that Hispanic householders with less than four years of high school had a median household income of $16,328 — 40% less than the $27,035 median income of Hispanic householders with four years of high school or some college. In addition, Census data show that Puerto Rican households headed by a person 25 years of age and older with less than four years of high school were about one-and one-half times as likely as all Puerto Rican families to be poor (54.4% vs. 37.5%, respectively). But little research exists to show the specific impact that low levels of education have on the employability of young Puerto Rican males.

Most of the education research on Puerto Rican youth concerns the low levels of high school and college completion and the high rates of dropping out, especially in some cities. Additionally, Puerto Rican student data are not always disaggregated; therefore, the data that are available nationally tend to reflect data for Latinos as a whole, two-thirds of whom are Mexican American.

The most recent compilation of educational data on Latinos[1] shows that Puerto Rican eighth-graders:

- Have the lowest math scores of all Hispanic subgroups (24.5% scoring below basic level);
- Are most likely among Hispanics to report grades in the bottom quartile;
- Are less likely than other Hispanic students to have plans for enrolling in a college preparatory high school and the most likely ethnic group to plan to enroll in vocational, technical, or business programs;
- Are especially vulnerable to academic failure and dropping out because they are more likely than other Hispanic students to come from a single parent home and to have a sibling who dropped out of school — two key factors identified by previous research from the National Center for Education Statistics;
- Are likely to come from families where at least one parent did not finish high school (25%);
- Have the highest percentage among all Hispanics of families with incomes below $15,000;
- Spend an average of five hours a week on homework and 26 hours a week watching television; and
- Are most likely among Hispanics to report feeling unsafe at school and most likely to report involvement in a fight.

The connection between educational levels and economic status is well-documented. It is critical, then, to understand the points in the development of young Puerto Rican men at which policies and strategies can intervene to positively influence educational outcomes. It is clear that poverty, social environment, parents' socioeconomic status and levels of educational attainment, and residence are strong predictors of Puerto Rican youths' school completion. Puerto Rican leaders, advocates, and researchers* suggest additional barriers which must be addressed to improve education outcomes, including low parent participation in education, inadequate school curricula which are not inclusive of Latino males; and insufficient pressure from communities to make schools more responsive to Puerto Rican children's needs.

## Puerto Rican Education: Research Highlights

A 1982 study by the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that Puerto Rican students reported lower educational aspirations than non-Hispanic Black or White students.[2] This finding was confirmed by the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey in which 29.4% of Puerto Rican eighth-graders reported not expecting to attend college, compared to 22.9% of their White and 19.8% of their Black counterparts. An analysis of Puerto Rican workers in the U.S. showed that earnings gaps between Puerto Rican and White male workers with comparable levels of education *increase* rather than decrease as higher levels of schooling are completed,[3] suggesting that Puerto Rican students may have lower aspirations because of the perception of the limited opportunities available to them. Other data show similarly distressing differences and lack of educational parity between Puerto Rican and other Hispanic students and their White counterparts.[4]

As a result of the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican students and the issues that they face within schools, a focus among researchers is educational outcomes; high dropout rates and lack of school completion among Puerto Ricans are serious issues that have not fully been addressed. Again, the lack of data has limited researchers in their analyses.

Research by ASPIRA examining the causes of school leaving among Hispanic youth found that Mexicans and Puerto Ricans are especially likely to be delayed in school and to drop out of high school.[5] Additionally, the study noted that, for Latinos, repeating a grade, not planning to go to college, and not having a father at home were associated with dropping out of high school. In a three-year longitudinal study of Puerto Rican youth in Philadelphia, Gutiérrez and Montalvo examined the connection between dropping out and delinquency and found a significant positive relationship between the two.[6] They also found further support for the connection between low family income and dropping out. In a summary article, Rosado briefly reviewed some of the literature on Hispanic dropouts and, citing Vélez, reported that the confrontational tendency among Hispanic male youth is a factor in the decision to quit school.[7] Moreover, he suggested that the Puerto Rican student's attitude toward education and his effort in school are more problematic than language issues. In 1992, Rodríguez and the Latino Commission on Educational Reform in New York City proposed strategies, such as offering cross-cultural studies and developing bilingual night programs for students and parents, to reduce the Latino drop out rate, based on discussions with Puerto Rican and other Latino high school students.[8]

* These suggestions are taken from the *Puerto Rican Young Men and Poverty Project NCLR Round Table discussion.*



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## Employment: The Link to Puerto Rican Family Poverty

The transition from school to work is especially crucial for Puerto Rican youth who, as noted above, are overrepresented in schools that do not provide a competitive education, tend to live in central cities where resources are scarce and economic opportunities are limited, and have parents with lower levels of education than their White counterparts. This combination of poor employment preparation and options has implications for Puerto Rican families since there is a direct link between adults who have primary earnings responsibility and the socioeconomic status of the family. The families of both male and female heads of household who are unemployed or who have limited or weak employment histories are especially likely to be poor.

There are several areas that need both policy and community-based attention in order to enhance the employability and the job opportunities of young Puerto Rican males. This report introduces some of these issues below and will explore them further in the final report.

- First, addressing educational issues — including both high school and college completion, inequity in school financing and resources, and poor quality schools — is critical to improving Puerto Rican male employability.

- Second, the NCLR Round Table discussion suggested that researchers analyze the erosion of Puerto Rican male wages as well as examine the higher rate of Puerto Rican unemployment despite their slightly higher levels of educational attainment compared to other Hispanics.

- Third, lack of economic growth, stagnating wages, and limited or no job opportunities in central cities cannot be ignored in the employment status of Puerto Rican males. In recent years, employment opportunities, especially for workers with high school educations or less, have diminished.

- Finally, discrimination cannot be dismissed as a factor in Puerto Rican employment status; specifically, such discrimination influences job positions and types available to Puerto Rican young men, as well as job segmentation.[4] Such discrimination means that potential employment options for some may be opportunities denied for young Puerto Rican men who are entering the work force.

The need for opportunities to enter the world of work is especially significant for Puerto Rican young males who seek jobs directly after high school rather than pursue higher education — a path usually chosen by their more advantaged peers. Such young men need mentoring, exposure to careers and role models, and opportunities to interact with adults and learn positive behaviors that will facilitate their movement in the work force and their advancement into other jobs. Puerto Rican socioeconomic status cannot improve without greater access to jobs which offer opportunities for mobility and progress.

## Puerto Rican Employment: Research Highlights

Employment research suggests that there is a relationship between Latino male employment and family status. Aponte, Wilson, and others underscore two links: first, male unemployment and low earnings may affect marital instability. Second, unemployed men appear to be less likely to marry than their employed counterparts. Yet, postponing marriage has not disrupted the formation of young families. Unemployment and low wages may prevent or delay marriage, but not necessarily parenthood. This has contributed to an increase in unmarried births to unstable and unprepared families without economic and social supports.

A significant issue concerning the relationship between work status and family economic stability regards the deteriorating position of males who are young, undereducated, and Black or Latino. According to research by the Children's Defense Fund,[10] the average earned income for a male between the ages of 20 and 24 dropped by about 30% between 1973 and 1984. Young, poor Blacks and Latinos with low education and weak basic academic skills have been hurt most by these economic changes. In 1973, 60% of all males were able to earn enough to lift a family of three above the poverty level; during the 1980s, that proportion decreased to 42%. For Hispanic young men, the comparative drop was from 61% to 35%, suggesting that only about one-third of Latino young men are financially able to support a family of three. (Data disaggregated by Latino subgroup are not available.)

Research cites five major factors in the decline of male earnings since the 1970s: the shift from a manufacturing based-economy to one with jobs concentrated in the service sector; the reduced ability of young men to secure full-time, year-round employment; the erosion of the real value of the minimum wage; significant reductions in the number of hours worked; and an increase in male unemployment. These factors have had an especially adverse effect on young men, poor men, and those in urban areas — including Puerto Ricans.

The small body of literature which explores how Puerto Rican youth fit into this picture presents several important findings. Early research by Hernández (1983) suggested that English proficiency was a predictor for young Puerto Rican men's ability to find employment, but not for other age-gender groups. Additional research by Vélez and Javalgi demonstrated that previous labor market experiences can be an important factor among Puerto Rican youth seeking employment; having a good first job provides some advantage when looking for jobs; and periods of unemployment decrease the probability of finding a job. The authors found that "providing meaningful and adequate jobs during the early years can have a positive impact on the labor market experiences of [Puerto Rican] youth."[11]

Yet, such jobs are not available for a substantial segment of Puerto Rican young males, in part, because of employment discrimination. While there continue to be questions about the extent to which discrimination explains earnings and occupational distribution, there is growing evidence which suggests both that discrimination is central to discussions of socioeconomic status and that it is a significant obstacle for Puerto Rican workers. In a study discussed and documented by Reimers, analyses showed that "discrimination in the labor market may be responsible for a wage differential, compared to non-Hispanic white men, of 18% for Puerto Rican men." Additional studies examining the disparity in income between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites during the last decade reveal that the percentage of the income gap between Hispanic males and non-Hispanic White males that is attributable to discrimination falls within a 10-18% range.[12] Finally, an analysis by Torres shows that employment discrimination accounts for significant wage discrepancies among U.S.-born Puerto Rican males.[13] In sum, employment discrimination may influence the entry and position of young Puerto Rican men in the labor force.

The significance of the relationship between education, employment, and family economic well-being is clear. The interaction of these variables is central to understanding the persistent poverty of Puerto Rican families and the development of appropriate public policy responses. But, large-scale public policies should complement other efforts to assist young Puerto Rican men, including those developed and implemented at the community level.



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# PERSPECTIVES FROM THE COMMUNITY

## Overview

During their discussion of young PuertoRican men and family poverty, Puerto Rican leaders and researchers who participated in the NCLR Round Table stressed the need to place the concerns of Puerto Ricans on both state and national policy agendas. However, because the Puerto Rican community is concentrated in specific areas of the U.S., it is critical that efforts to address the serious issues facing Puerto Ricans include a significant emphasis on local communities. In particular, participants explored how community-based strategies can improve the education and employment options of young Puerto Rican men and reduce the poverty of Puerto Rican families.

Several themes surfaced from the NCLR Round Table discussion with respect to addressing Puerto Rican young men and family poverty:

- **The Significance of Educational Status.** Participants moved the discussion of educational issues past the traditional assumption that education is inextricably linked to employment opportunities to one that challenged how schools can be pushed to better serve Puerto Rican youth. There was a general consensus that, in addition to efforts to upgrade the quality of education and increase Puerto Rican faculty and staff, strategies and policies that link community-based organizations to schools should be more concretely explored. Participants believed that stronger relationships and cooperative partnerships between community-based organizations and public schools could have a significant impact on the educational outcomes of Puerto Rican youth.

- **An Emphasis on Economic Issues.** The discussion on employment raised several topics for future consideration, including the importance of human capital characteristics, structural changes in the economy, discrimination, and the underclass. It was overwhelmingly agreed that social and economic policy theories which have been developed to help explain demographic changes in the African American community cannot automatically be applied to Puerto Ricans. Participants felt that while there may be some similarities between the two groups, each situation is complex and such theories do not fully account for the significant differences and changes in each community. Participants also raised the significance of external, structural factors such as economic changes and geographic concentration as being crucial to the examination of Puerto Rican family poverty and as key variables in the explanation of Puerto Rican males' labor market status.

- **The Need to Increase Visibility.** The importance of highlighting and drawing attention to Puerto Rican poverty was underscored. Moreover, participants agreed that the issues pertinent to Puerto Rican family poverty needed to be include in broader public policy agendas; for example, the current national debate on welfare reform should be viewed from the perspective of its impact on Puerto Rican families.

- **The Loss of Vision and the Absence of a "Movement."** Most participants agreed that one of the challenges in addressing the issues facing Puerto Rican young males stems from a loss of vision and leadership within the community. Moreover, the absence of a "movement," as during the '60s, often leaves a void or a lack of common purpose among groups responding to these issues. This absence of a movement also allows the larger mainstream society to ignore, neglect, or simply not know about the serious socioeconomic problems facing Puerto Rican

families. Rejuvenating this vision and this common purpose, both within community-based organizations and among Puerto Rican youth, is necessary to effectively respond to the socio-economic problems facing Puerto Ricans on the mainland.

- **"Scale."** The issue of scale, particularly as it relates to community-based organizations and their limited ability to respond to the problems facing the Puerto Rican community, was a recurring theme during the NCLR Round Table. Several participants raised the concern that policy makers cannot simply look to Puerto Rican community-based organizations for "the answers." The discussion concluded with participants agreeing that community-based organizations are one facet of the "solution" and a key resource in the community, especially for young Puerto Rican men, since they provide the bridge that many young men need between their families and the worlds of school and work. However, other public and private entities share some responsibility as well.

- **The Relevance of Social Problems.** The increase in crime, violence, drug use, and their consequences were raised as being increasingly influential in the status of both Puerto Rican young men and Puerto Rican families. Greater data and attention on the impact of these issues on young Puerto Rican men is needed. Moreover, NCLR Round Table participants believed that labeling Puerto Rican and other minority males "at-risk" of these and other problems has a negative effect on their self-esteem as well as on self-fulfilling prophecies.

## Implications for Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations are already playing a critical role in the Puerto Rican community's development and, specifically, assisting Puerto Rican young males. They supplement the roles of traditional institutions and agencies, which often have not welcomed or effectively addressed the needs of young Puerto Rican men. They also have been instrumental in addressing a range of issues including: health, decision making, developing self-esteem, postponing pregnancy, preventing AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases, and providing recreational and other alternatives to gangs and drugs. Now, community-based organizations must also address other barriers to educational attainment and successful employment which include delinquency, crime, and incarceration.

NCLR Round Table participants focused on practical, immediate responses to the employment needs of Puerto Rican young men and emphasized the role community-based organizations could play in these efforts. Among their suggestions for community-based efforts:

- Acknowledge and respond to the need for employment opportunities;
- Establish working alliances with corporations and community-based businesses;
- Create internships, hands-on-training, and other work experiences; and
- Develop access to successful Latino(a)s who may serve as role models or mentors for the youth.

But, as NCLR Round Table participants noted, community-based organizations can not do it alone. They are already overburdened and underfunded. Other sectors of society must step in and respond to the fact that more than half of an entire community's children are living in poverty. The Puerto Rican community itself, both individuals and leadership, clearly has a crucial role to play, but other public and private institutions must also do their part. The problems facing young Puerto Rican men and their families are related to larger urban issues and must be addressed through multiple approaches. Some of these approaches will be explored in the Project's final report.

# CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The data on Puerto Rican families and young males presented above provide some understanding of the persistent disadvantaged status of the mainland Puerto Rican community. A deeper analysis is needed to understand the extent to which Puerto Rican males' education and employment experiences affect the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican families.

Based on the research and data, several findings emerge. These findings have implications for areas that can be crucial points of entry in attempting to promote the positive development of young Puerto males, increase their educational levels, and enhance their economic opportunities. The report concludes that:

- **The persistent poverty of Puerto Rican families is connected both to education and employment issues.** Puerto Rican poverty is complex to explain and results from numerous factors, including structural economic changes, low educational attainment, the growth of single-mother families, and vulnerable employment status.

- **Education is one of the most critical factors in determining economic outcomes of young Puerto Rican men.** Poor educational opportunities, negative school experiences, and low levels of school completion have a direct impact on the employment options and higher educational opportunities of young Puerto Rican men.

- **Male unemployment and limited connection to the work force affect Puerto Rican poverty.** Unemployment rates have risen over the past decade, particularly for workers — including Puerto Ricans — concentrated in inner cities. In addition, compared to their White or other Hispanic counterparts, Puerto Rican men are less connected to the work force, although when they are employed they have higher wages than comparable Hispanic male workers. As described in the report, the deteriorating labor force status of young Puerto Rican men has implications for the growth of female-headed families, which in turn is related to the high poverty rate of the Puerto Rican community.

- **Changes in the economy help to explain the labor force status of young Puerto Rican men.** The shift from low-skilled jobs to those that require higher skills and education has displaced young men — including Puerto Ricans — who are not adequately prepared for such employment because of low educational attainment levels.

- **Discrimination in both earnings and job opportunities for young Puerto Rican males contributes to Puerto Rican poverty.** While there continue to be questions about the extent to which discrimination explains job status and earnings, there is growing evidence which suggests that discrimination influences the entry and position of young Puerto Rican men in the labor force.

- **The location and residence of Puerto Rican young men and their families are connected to their rising unemployment and declining labor force participation rates.** The lack of jobs in inner cities where Puerto Ricans are concentrated and lack of access issues to new jobs outside of cities may play a role in Puerto Rican family poverty.

- **Further research is needed on the role that substance abuse, delinquency, crime, and incarceration play in hindering the positive development of young Puerto Rican men.** Crime and delinquency data on Puerto Rican young men are scarce, yet preliminary studies show that they are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Community-based information suggests that these young men do not always have positive alternatives and that they model the behavior that surrounds them. Without a doubt, such paths have serious implications for these young men, their families, and their communities.

The report also shows that the relationship between labor market status and marriage delay has been well established and suggests that unmarried young men are more likely to be unemployed than their married male counterparts — but equally likely to father children. More research is needed on Puerto Rican teen and young fathers, specifically, to determine the extent to which they support and participate in the families that they create.

Additionally, although there is debate about the applicability of African American poverty theories to Puerto Rican poverty, the experiences of African American young males and the growing research and hypotheses about their socioeconomic status may contribute to a better understanding of the situation of Puerto Rican young males. Comparative analyses of the two groups, as well as specific data on Puerto Rican young males, can provide new perspectives on and point to new directions for addressing persistent poverty among Puerto Rican families.

The socioeconomic status of mainland Puerto Ricans demands that policy makers, researchers, and advocates to focus particular attention on Puerto Ricans. In turn, Puerto Ricans must increase their visibility in the social policy arena and become part of larger social efforts and agendas. The data and research in this report underscore that the issues facing Puerto Rican youth and their families have implications for current public policy debates. For example:

- **Specific attention should be given to Puerto Rican young men in the development of future employment and training programs and policies.** The report documents that young Puerto Rican men between the ages of 16 and 24 tend to be undereducated, low-skilled, and poor. Current consideration of work-readiness strategies in the form of apprenticeships and school-to-work efforts must include a focus on young adult Puerto Rican males who constitute an important segment of the local labor force in many Northeast and Midwest cities. In addition, existing and newly-developed programs should not "cream" the best youth, but rather focus efforts on those who are less prepared for the workforce and have more to gain from effective training.

- **Anti-poverty strategies and social programs should be assessed for how well they serve Puerto Rican families and youth.** NCLR research has shown that Hispanics as a whole tend to be underrepresented or not adequately served by federal programs. In particular, policy makers should work to ensure that Puerto Rican youth have greater representation in existing programs and policies structures that already exist, such as Head Start and Job Corps.

- **Upcoming welfare reform efforts should critically examine Puerto Rican family and child poverty, and the role of young men in the formation of single-mother families.** Because of the large proportion of Puerto Rican single-mother families, the lack of information regarding the men who help to form these families, and the high rate of Puerto Rican family poverty, any efforts to revise the public assistance system must consider and include the impact on Puerto Ricans.

Understanding and improving the socioeconomic status of young Puerto Rican men and their families through a combination of self-help, community-based, and public policy strategies can offer important information for how to address other facets of poverty in the U.S., including urban poverty and the poverty of female-headed families.

The information in this report will be used as the basis for a series of focus groups with young Puerto Rican men in four cities to better understand their educational and employment experiences; and gain their perspectives about how policy makers, advocates, and others can have an impact on their future opportunities and status. The economic stability and prospective well-being of the Puerto Rican mainland community — and their ability to contribute to the social and economic development of the U.S. states and cities in which they are concentrated — will, in part, be determined by the role Puerto Rican young men play. As this report shows, the need for strengthening their education levels and employability is especially critical.

# APPENDICES

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- Poverty Project, ***Poverty Project Newsletter***. Washington, D.C.: National Council of La Raza. 1992. FREE

  Quarterly newsletter covering current research findings, policy news, Census data, and legislation on Hispanic poverty and related issues. Established Spring 1989.

- Pérez, Sonia M. and Deirdre Martínez, ***State of Hispanic America 1993: Toward A Latino Anti-Poverty Agenda***. July 1993 (43 pages). $7.50

  Research and policy analysis report which assesses the Latino groups most affected by poverty and explores strategies to reduce Hispanic poverty. Includes numerous charts and graphs.

- Pérez, Sonia M. and Denise De La Rosa Salazar, **"Economic, Labor Force, and Social Implications of Latino Education and Population Trends,"** May 1993 (41 pages).

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- Pérez, Sonia M. and Steven Cruz, ***Puerto Rican and African American Young Men: A Comparative Analysis***. May 1993 (46 pages).

  Paper prepared for the William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts. Includes several charts and graphs. Available from the Trotter Institute, (617) 287-5880.

- Pérez, Sonia M. and Luis A. Duany, ***Reducing Hispanic Teenage Pregnancy and Family Poverty: A Replication Guide***. July 1992 (122 pages). $15.00

  Replication guide for community-based organizations interested in developing and implementing a teenage pregnancy prevention and/or parenting program targeted to Hispanic youth.

- Quiroz, Julia T. and Regina Tosca, ***For My Children: Mexican American Women, Work, and Welfare***. April 1992 (40 pages). $7.50

  Second and final report of a two-year project which examined the impact of welfare reform legislation (the Family Support Act) on Mexican American families.

- Quiroz, Julia T. and Regina Tosca, ***On My Own: Mexican American Women, Self-Sufficiency and the Family Support Act***. December 1990 (50 pages). $7.50

  Presents findings from the first year of a two-year study on the impact of the Family Support Act on Mexican American single mothers.

- Miranda, Leticia and Julia T. Quiroz, ***The Decade of the Hispanic: An Economic Retrospective***. April 1990 (27 pages). $7.50

  Provides a discussion of the most important economic trends experienced by Hispanics in the 1980s, an analysis of their causes, and public policy recommendations. Includes 27 descriptive charts.

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